

Of Visions and Stories

The Distinctive Problems with Joseph Smith's First Vision

"That glorious theophany which took place in the spring of 1820 and which marked the opening of the dispensation of the fullness of times is called the First Vision... This transcendent vision was the beginning of latter-day revelation; it marked the opening of the heavens after the long night of apostate darkness; with it ushered in the great era of restoration... This vision was the most important event that had taken place in all world history from the day of Christ's ministry to the glorious hour when it occurred." – Bruce R. McConkie, Mormon Doctrine¹

Introduction

Since it was founded, the United States of America has seen many new religions and movements born on its lands. Only a few have survived the tests of time. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (commonly referred to as the Mormons or LDS) stands out amongst them all as securing the greatest numbers and having the greatest impact on the United States. The most recent statistics claim almost 12 million people are members of the LDS Church worldwide, with more than 200,000 people joining the Church each year².

For these 12 million, their hope, faith, and belief rest upon the shoulders of Joseph Smith Jr., the principal founder and visionary of the Church. Throughout the history of the Mormon Church controversies, allegations, and mythologies have swirled around the person of Joseph Smith Jr. Since the first proclamations of the truth of Mormonism to this very day non-believers have left almost no stone unturned in arguing against his claims. For them, Smith was a deceitful boy with a wild imagination out to make a name for himself by whatever means possible. For believers, he was a divinely

¹ Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1966. 284-285.

² As claimed by the LDS. See the "Statistical Report, 2003"

<<http://library.lds.org/nxt/gateway.dll/Magazines/Ensign/2004.htm/ensign%20may%202004.htm/statistical%20report%202003.htm>>, and "News of the Church." *Ensign*, Sept. 2004: 76.

inspired prophet who has restored the true church that fell away after the death of the New Testament apostles. They claim that because of Smith's prophetic status the fullness of the gospel (the message of the New Testament as described by Smith) can now be preached throughout the Earth.

How did Joseph Smith Jr. receive the fullness of the gospel? The story is one of the most central of Mormon beliefs. For if Joseph Smith Jr. was no prophet and saw no visions, "then the Mormon Church is what its detractors declare it to be—a wicked and deliberate imposture."³ The beginnings of the Mormon Church cannot be separated from the many visions claimed by Joseph Smith Jr. He had several visions of an angel named Moroni prior to his "discovery" of the Book of Mormon. After he began translating the plates of the Book of Mormon and established the Mormon Church he had at least six visions in the company of friends. While each of these carry with them important doctrines and stories of the LDS faith, it is said that the very first vision of all carries with it the most importance.

The First Vision, as told today, is the story of young Joseph Smith Jr. at the age of fourteen, struggling to figure out which church to join. Upon praying to God for wisdom, he saw two people, God the Father and Jesus Christ. They told him not to join any church as none of them had the truth. Current LDS President Gordon B. Hinckley has said that, "Our whole strength rests on the validity of that vision. It either occurred or it did not occur. If it did not, then this work is a fraud. If it did, then it is the most important and wonderful work under the heavens."⁴

³ LDS Apostle Hugh B. Brown, An Abundant Life. Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books. 310-311.

⁴ "The Marvelous Foundation of Our Faith" 172nd Semiannual General Conference. Salt Lake City. 6 Oct. 2002.

The problem that has faced the Mormon Church is that we have a variety of different accounts of the First Vision. At best, some accounts leave out details others contain. At worst, the accounts may be found to be contradictory. Some have challenged the historical reliability of the accounts, finding that some of the details could not have occurred when they claimed to have. Others have contested these points and defended the received First Vision of Joseph Smith Jr.

The task of this article is to determine the plausibility of each element of the First Vision account in light of the historical data available to us, the arguments presented by both sides, and also in light of each other. In an effort to be objective, this paper does not assume Mormonism to be true or false or Joseph Smith Jr. to be a deceiver or prophet. The purpose is to follow the available evidence wherever it leads. In regards to spiritual things, this paper also does not assume naturalism. The door is open for the received First Vision account to be true, that Smith saw both God the Father and Jesus Christ. However, in leaving this door open, it also does not assume that if spiritual things took place, they were good. The door is as open for demons as it is for angels; wherever the evidence leads.

The Received Account (JSH39) and Important Elements

What is most often referred to as the First Vision account was first published in a Mormon newspaper, Times and Seasons, in 1842⁵, though it was originally written in 1839. It was later included in the Pearl of Great Price in 1851, which is a collection of “translations”, prophecies, and writings by Joseph Smith Jr. The book was canonized as Mormon scripture in 1880 and thus is the only authoritative account recognized by most

⁵ More specifically, vol. 3 pages 727-728, 748-749. These can be viewed online at <http://www.centerplace.org/history/ts/vol3.htm>.

Mormon believers. The underlined portions represent important distinctive elements relevant to the discussion⁶.

5 Some time in the second year after our removal to Manchester, there was in the place where we lived an unusual excitement on the subject of religion. It commenced with the Methodists, but soon became general among all the sects in that region of country, indeed, the whole district of Country seemed affected by it and great multitudes united themselves to the different religious parties, which created no small stir and division amongst the people, Some crying, “Lo here” and some Lo there. Some were contending for the Methodist faith, Some for the Presbyterian, and some for the Baptist;

6 for, notwithstanding the great love which the converts to these different faiths expressed at the time of their conversion, and the great Zeal manifested by the respective Clergy who were active in getting up and promoting this extraordinary scene of religious feeling in order to have everybody converted as they were pleased to call it, let them join what sect they pleased, yet when the Converts began to file off some to one party and some to another, it was seen that the seemingly good feelings of both the Priests and the Converts were ~~more pretence~~ more pretended than real, for a scene of great confusion and bad feeling ensued; Priest contending against priest, and convert against convert so that all their good feelings one for another, if they ever had any, were entirely lost in a strife of words and a contest about opinions.

7 I was at this time in my fifteenth year. My father’s family was<ere> proselyted to the Presbyterian faith and four of them joined that Church, Namely, My Mother Lucy; My Brothers Hyrum, Samuel Harrison, and my Sister Sophronia.

8 During this time of great excitement my mind was called up to serious reflection and great uneasiness, but though my feelings were deep and often pungent (poignant), still I kept myself aloof from all these parties though I attended their several meetings <as often> as occasion would permit. But in process of time my mind became somewhat partial to the Methodist sect, and I felt some desire to be united with them, but so great were the confusion and strife amongst the different denominations that it was impossible for a person young as I was, and so unacquainted with men and things to come to any certain conclusion who was right and who was wrong.

9 My mind at times was greatly excited ~~for~~ the cry and tumult were so great and incessant. The Presbyterians were most decided against the Baptists and Methodists, and used all the powers of both reason or sophistry to prove their errors, or at least to make the people think they were in error. On the other hand the Baptists and Methodists in their turn were equally Zealous in endeavoring to establish their own tenets and disprove all others.

10 In the midst of this war of words, and tumult of opinions, I often said to myself, what is to be done? Who of all these parties are right? Or are they all wrong together? And if any one of them be right which is it? And how shall I know it?

11 While I was laboring under the extreme difficulties caused by the contests of these parties of religionists, I was one day reading the Epistle of James, First chapter and fifth verse

⁶ The following account is taken from the original 1839 writing with modern verse divisions added. The passage comes from Dan Vogel, *Early Mormon Documents: Volume 1*. Salt Lake City, Utah: 1996. 58-61, 143, with later additions noted in parenthesis. Underlining has been added for emphasis. Words that appear with a strike through them are crossed out in the original manuscript. Words in angle brackets were inserted above the line. In some cases it is not clear where they are to be inserted aside from context.

which reads, "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.

12 Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man that (than) this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart. I reflected on it again and again, knowing that if any person needed wisdom from God, I did; for how to act I did not know and unless I could get more wisdom than I then had, (I) would never know; for the teachers of religion of the different sects understood the same passages of scripture so differently as <to> destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible.

13 At length I came to the conclusion that I must either remain in darkness and confusion or else I must do as James directs, that is, Ask of God. I at last (length) came to the determination to ask of God, concluding that if he gave wisdom to them that lacked wisdom, and would give liberally and not upbraid, I might venture.

14 So, in accordance with this, my determination to ask of God, I retired to the woods to make the attempt. It was on the morning of a beautiful clear day early in the spring of Eighteen hundred and twenty. It was the first time in my life that I had <made> such an attempt, for amidst all <my> anxieties I had never as yet made the attempt to pray vocally.

15 After I had retired to the place where I had previously designed to go, having looked around me and finding myself alone, I kneeled down and began to offer up the desires of my heart to God. I had scarcely done so, when immediately I was <seized> upon by some power which entirely overcame me and <had> such an astonishing influence over me as to bind my tongue so that I could not speak. Thick darkness gathered around me and it seemed to me for a time as if I were doomed to sudden destruction.

16 But exerting all my powers to call upon God to deliver me out of the power of this enemy which had seized upon me, and at the very moment when I was ready to sink into despair and abandon myself to destruction, not to an imaginary ruin but to the power of some actual being from the unseen world who had such marvelous power as I had never before felt in any being. Just at this moment of great alarm I saw a pillar <of> light exactly over my head above the brightness of the sun, which descended ~~gracefully~~ gradually until it fell upon me.

17 It no sooner appeared than I found myself delivered from the enemy which held me bound. When the light rested upon me I saw two personages, whose brightness and glory defy all description, standing above me in the air. One of <them> spake unto me calling me by name and said, pointing to the other, "This is my beloved Son, Hear him!"

18 My object in going to enquire of the Lord was to know which of all the sects was right, that I might know which to join. No sooner therefore did I get possession of myself so as to be able to speak, than I asked the personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right, for at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong, and which I should join.

19 I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong, and the Personage who addressed me said that all their Creeds were an abomination in his sight, that those professors were all corrupt; that "they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, They teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of Godliness, but they deny the power thereof."

20 He again forbade me to join with any of them and many other things did he say unto me which I cannot write at this time. When I came to myself again I found myself lying on <my> back, looking up into Heaven. (When the light had departed, I had no strength; but soon recovering in some degree, I went home. And as I leaned up to the fireplace, mother

inquired what the matter was. I replied, “Never mind, all is well—I am well enough off.” I then said to my mother, “I have learned for myself that Presbyterianism is not true.” It seems as though the adversary was aware, at a very early period of my life, that I was destined to prove a disturber and an annoyer of his kingdom; else why should the powers of darkness combine against me? Why the opposition and persecution that arose against me, almost in my infancy?)^{7,8}

Using this JSH39 account (from “Joseph Smith – History”) as a guide there are six distinctive elements: The date of the vision and age of Joseph Smith Jr., mention of revival(s), attack from dark powers, the appearance of personages, message of corrupt churches, and the central message of the vision. These stand out as distinctive elements as they do not always appear in other accounts or appear differently. Chronologically, these accounts should be arranged as follows:

1. Joseph Smith History, 1832 (JSH32)
2. Joseph Smith’s Diary November 9, 1835 (JSD35)
3. Joseph Smith History, 1839 – Received Account (JSH39)
4. William Appleby Biography circa 1839 (WIA39)
5. Orson Pratt Pamphlet 1840 (OPA40)
6. Orson Hyde Account 1841 (OHR41)
7. Letter: Joseph Smith to John Wentworth March 1, 1842 (JSW42)
8. Letter: Joseph Smith to I. Daniel Rupp (JSR43)
9. Joseph Smith Interview With David White (DNW43)
10. Alexander Neibaur Journal Entry May 24, 1844 (ANJ44)
11. Letter: John Taylor to Editor June 25, 1850 (JTL50)

Joseph Smith History, 1832 (JSH32)

In 1832 Joseph Smith Jr. attempted the writing of a history of his life. Smith wrote it with the help of Frederick G. Williams in Kirtland, Ohio, between July 20 and

⁷ From “Joseph Smith – History” in *The Pearl of Great Price*, 1:5-20, pp. 47-49. This can be viewed online at http://scriptures.lds.org/js_h/1.

⁸ This last insertion was added by Willard Richards December 2, 1842. Though it appears in the modern received account, it did not appear in the account published in *Times and Seasons* of April 1, 1842.

November 27, 1832. Though the project was never completed, and no one seems to know why, it has been preserved in the original handwriting in Smith's letterbook. Not only is it the first known written First Vision account, but also the account itself is entirely in Smith's own handwriting⁹.

At about the age of twelve years my mind became seriously imprest with regard to the all important concerns for the welfare of my immortal Soul which led me to Searching the Scriptures believing as I was taught, that they contained the word of God thus applying myself to them and my intimate acquaintance with those of different denominations led me to marvel exceedingly far I discovered that ~~<they did not adorn>~~ ~~instead~~ of adorning their profession by a holy walk and Godly conversation agreeable to what I found contained in that Sacred depository this was a grief to my Soul thus from the age of twelve years to fifteen I pondered many things in my heart concerning the situation of the world of mankind the contentions and divisions the wickedness and abominations and the darkness which pervaded the ~~of the~~ minds of mankind my mind became exceedingly distressed for I became convicted of my Sins and by Searching the Scriptures I found that ~~man~~ <mankind> did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatised from the true and living faith and there was no society or denomination that built upon the Gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament and I felt to mourn for my own Sins and for the Sins of the world for I learned in the Scriptures that God was the same yesterday to day and forever that he was no respecter to persons for he was God for I looked upon the sun the glorious luminary of the earth and also the moon rolling in their majesty through the heavens and also the Stars Shining in their courses and the earth also upon which I stood and the beast of the field and the fowls of heaven and the fish of the waters and also man walking forth upon the face of the earth in majesty and in the Strength of beauty whose power and intelligence in governing the things which are so exceeding great and marvellous even in the likeness of him who created ~~him~~ ~~<them>~~ and when I considered upon these things my heart exclaimed well hath the wise man Said ~~the~~ ~~<it is a>~~ fool ~~<that>~~ Saith in his heart there is no God my heart exclaimed all these bear testimony and bespeak an omnipotent and omnipresent power a being who maketh Laws and decreeth and bindeth all things in their bounds who filleth Eternity who was and is and will be from all Eternity to Eternity and when I considered all these things and that [that] being Seeketh such to worship him as worship him in spirit and in truth therefore I cried unto the Lord for mercy for there was none else to whom I could go and ~~to~~ obtain mercy and the Lord heard my cry in the wilderness and while in ~~<the>~~ attitude of calling upon the Lord <in the 16th year of my age> a pillar of ~~fire~~ light above the brightness of the Sun at noon day come down from above and rested upon me and I was filled with the Spirit of God and the ~~<Lord>~~ opened the heavens upon me and I Saw the Lord and he Spake unto me Saying Joseph ~~<my son>~~ thy Sins are forgiven thee. go thy ~~<way>~~ walk in my Statutes and keep my commandments behold I am the Lord of glory I was crucified for the world that all those who believe on my name may have Eternal life ~~<behold>~~ the world lieth in sin ~~and~~ at this time and none doeth good no not one they have turned aside from the Gospel and keep

⁹ Williams wrote about 10 lines of introductory words before Smith's account, and he wrote most of the rest of the work after Smith's writing of the First Vision. It is interesting to note from an editorial standpoint that there are many misspelled and crossed out words in Smith's writing while there are far fewer misspelled words and only one word crossed out in William's writing.

not <my> commandments they draw near to me with their lips while their hearts are far from me and mine anger is kindling against the inhabitants of the earth to visit them according to this ungodliness and to bring to pass that which <hath> been spoken by the mouth of the prophets and Apostles behold and lo I come quickly as it <is> written of me in the cloud <clothed> in the glory of my Father and my Soul was filled with love and for many days I could rejoice with great joy and the Lord was with me but <I> could find none that would believe the heavenly vision nevertheless I pondered these things in my heart about that time my mother and but after many days ¹⁰I fell into transgression and sinned in many things which brought a wound upon my soul and there were many things which transpired that cannot be written and my Fathers family have suffered many persecutions...¹¹

Joseph Smith's Diary November 9, 1835 (JSD35)

This date in Joseph Smith Jr.'s diary records an encounter with a man named Robert Matthews who claimed to be God the Father. It appears that Smith recited the First Vision as a challenge to Matthew's claims.

Being wrought up in my mind, respecting the subject of religion and looking at upon the different systems taught the children of men, I knew not who was right or who was wrong and ~~I considered~~ considering it of the first importance that I should be right, in matters that involve eternal consequences; being thus perplexed in mind I retired to the silent grove and bowed down before the Lord, under a realising sense that he had said (if the bible be true) as and you shall receive knock and it shall be opened seek and you shall find and again, if any man lack wisdom let him ask of God who giveth to all men liberally and upbradeth not; information was what I most desired at this time, and with a fixed determination to obtain it, I called upon the Lord for the first time, in the place above stated or in other words I made a fruitless attempt to pray, my tongue seemed to be swollen in my mouth, so that I could not utter, I heard a noise behind me like some person walking towards me, I strove again to pray, but could not, the noise of walking seemed to draw nearer, I sprung up on my feet, ~~and~~ and looked around, but saw no person or thing that calculated to produce the noise of walking, I kneeled again my mouth was opened and my tongue liberated, and I called on the Lord in mighty prayer, a pillar of fire appeared above my head, it presently rested down upon ~~me~~ <my> head, and filled me with Joy unspeakable, a personage appeared in the midst of this pillar of flame which was spread all around, and yet nothing consumed, another personage appeared like unto the first, he said unto me thy sins are forgiven thee, he testified unto me that Jesus Christ is the Son of God; <and I saw many angels in this vision> I was about 14 years old when I received this first communication.¹²

William Appleby Biography circa 1839 (WIA39)

¹⁰ William's handwriting begins again here.

¹¹ Vogel, 27-29, underlining added for emphasis. A version is also available online at <http://www.boap.org/LDS/History/HTMLHistory/v1c1history.html>.

¹² Vogel, 43-44, underlining added for emphasis.

William I. Appleby was baptized into the Mormon faith in 1840. Before moving to Utah in 1849, he authored a biography in which he reminisced about a sermon given by Apostle Orson Pratt. Appleby claims the sermon was delivered in 1839, however, Vogel suggests it could have possibly been 1837. In any case, this First Vision account is notably word of mouth. It is at best third hand information remembered several years later. While this raises doubts about the accuracy of the account, it is still noteworthy to see what is mentioned or omitted or emphasized as it is one of the earliest accounts available to us.

Accordingly he retired to a secret grove, not far from his Fathers house; and there ~~day~~ ~~after day~~, did this youth pour out his soul to God to know which of the sects was right, and had the true doctrine that he might obey the same, and become a member of the Church. ~~one~~ ~~day~~ while praying a glorious light encircled him, his mind immediately wrapt in a Heavenly Vision, He saw two angelic beings, whose countenances were glorious beyond expression, stand before him, they declared themselves to be angels, sent from the courts of glory, to communicate to him, that his sins were forgiven; that his prayers were heard, and he was told not to go after any of the Sects, for the whole World, said they, are believing in incorrect doctrines¹³: that the authority of the Priesthood had long since been taken from the earthy and they informed him if he was faithful, the true plan of salvation should be revealed to him hereafter.” After which they disappeared leaving his mind in peace and tranquility.¹⁴

Orson Pratt Pamphlet 1840 (OPA40)

While working as a missionary in Scotland, Apostle Orson Pratt published a thirty-one paged pamphlet titled *A Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions and of the Late Discovery of Ancient American Records*. Included in this account is the first published version of the First Vision. Pratt was baptized into the Church by his brother, Parley, on September 19, 1830¹⁵. The two men were ordained as apostles in

¹³ Notation is actually underlined in the original manuscript, according to Vogel.

¹⁴ Vogel, 146-147, underlining added for emphasis.

¹⁵ This was Orson Pratt's birthday, which he shares with the author of this paper.

1835. Pratt's account "drew from his personal acquaintance and the Prophet's early writings for the material recounting Joseph's experiences."¹⁶

When somewhere about fourteen or fifteen years old, he began seriously to reflect upon the necessity of being prepared for a future state of existence...The great question to be decided in his mind, was – if any one of these denominations be the Church of Christ, which one is it? ... He, therefore retired to a secret place, in a grove, but a short distance from his father's house, and knelt down, and began to call upon the Lord. At first, he was severely tempted by the powers of darkness, which endeavoured to overcome him; but he continued to seek for deliverance, until darkness gave way from his mind; and he was enabled to pray, in fervency of the spirit, and in faith. And, while thus pouring out his soul, anxiously desiring an answer from God, he, at length, saw a very bright and glorious light in the heavens above; which, at first, seemed to be at a considerable distance. He continued praying, while the light appeared to be gradually descending towards him; and, as it drew nearer, it increased in brightness, and magnitude, so that, by the time that it reached the tops of the trees, the whole wilderness, for some distance around, was illuminated in a most glorious and brilliant manner. He expected to have seen the leaves and boughs of the trees consumed, as soon as the light came in contact with them; but, perceiving that it did not produce that effect, he was encouraged with the hopes of being able to endure the presence. It continued descending, slowly, until it rested upon the earth, and he was enveloped in the midst of it. When it first came upon him, it produced a peculiar sensation throughout his whole system; and, immediately, his mind was caught away, from the natural objects with which he was surrounded; and he was enwrapped in a heavenly vision, and saw two glorious personages, who exactly resembled each other in their features or likeness. He was informed, that his sins were forgiven. He was also informed upon the subjects, which had for some time previously agitated his mind, viz.—that all the religious denominations were believing incorrect doctrines; and, consequently, that none of them was acknowledged of God, as his church and kingdom. And he was expressly commanded, to go not after them; and he received a promise that the true doctrine—the fulness of the gospel, should, at some future time, be made known to him; after which the vision withdrew, leaving his mind in a state of calmness and peace, indescribable. Some time after having received this glorious manifestation, being young, he was again entangled in the vanities of the world, of which he afterwards sincerely and truly repented.¹⁷

Orson Hyde Account 1841 (OHR41)

Orson Hyde was another member of the Church who was ordained an apostle in 1835. He traveled and served a mission in Jerusalem before going to Germany where he published the first Mormon literature in a foreign language. The work, *Ein Ruf aus der Wüste, eine Stimme aus dem Schoosse der Erde* ("A Cry from the Wilderness, a Voice

¹⁶ Jessee, Dean C. ed. The Papers of Joseph Smith: Autobiographical and Historical Writings, Vol. 1 Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1989. 387. As quoted in Vogel, 149.

¹⁷ Vogel, 150-151, underlining added for emphasis.

from the Dust of the Earth”), was written in 1841 and subsequently published in Frankfurt in 1842. “Although heavily indebted to Orson Pratt’s 1840 *Interesting Account*, Hyde’s account differs in a number of respects. He had opportunity to learn Smith’s History from Smith family members, such as Hyde’s 1832 missionary companion Samuel Smith, if not from Joseph Smith himself.”¹⁸

¹⁹When he reached his fifteenth year, he began seriously to reflect on the importance of preparing for a future state of existence... He discovered the religious world laboring under a multitude of errors, which through their contradictory opinions and principles had laid the foundation for the organization of different sects and denominations, whose feelings toward each other all too often were poisoned by hate, contention, resentment and anger. He felt that there could only be one truth and that those who understood it correctly would all understand it in the same way...

On one occasion he went into a small grove of trees near his father’s residence and knelt down in solemn prayer before God. There the adversary made several strenuous attempts to cool the passion of his soul. He clouded his mind with doubts, and brought to his mind all sorts of improper images to prevent him from attaining the object of his endeavors; but the overflowing mercy of our God came to uplift him and impart new impetus to his failing strength. However, the dark cloud soon parted and light and peace filled his frightened heat. Once again he called upon the Lord with faith and fervency of spirit.

At this sacred moment, the natural world around him was taken from his views, so that he would be open to the presentation of heavenly and spiritual things. Two glorious heavenly personages stood before him, who exactly resembled each other in features and stature. They informed him that his prayers had been answered and that the Lord decided to grant him a special blessing. He was also told that he should not join any of the religious sects or denominations, because all of them were mistaken in their doctrine and not recognized by God at his church and kingdom. He was further commanded to wait patiently until a future time, when the true doctrine of Christ and the fulness of the gospel should be revealed to him. The vision closed and peace and calm filled his mind.²⁰

Letter: Joseph Smith to John Wentworth March 1, 1842 (JSW42)

Then editor of the *Chicago Democrat*, John Wentworth wrote to Joseph Smith Jr. in request of a “sketch of the rise, progress, persecution and faith of the Latter-day Saints.” Smith’s response was published in the Mormon newspaper *Times and Seasons* on March 1, 1842. “Similarities between the Wentworth letter and the text of

¹⁸ Vogel, 161.

¹⁹ According to Vogel, Hyde’s German is “imperfect.” This text is translated from Hyde’s German by Vogel aided by the works of the two previous English translations by Justus Ernst and Marvin H. Folsom.

²⁰ Vogel, 162-163, underlining added for emphasis.

Orson Pratt's [account], published in 1840, suggest that Smith used Pratt's work as a model."²¹

When about fourteen years of age I began to reflect upon the importance of being prepared for a future state, and upon enquiring the plan of salvation I found that there was a great clash in religious sentiment; if I went to one society they referred to one plan, and another to another; each one pointing to his own particular creed as the summum bonum of perfection: considering that all could not be right, and that God could not be the author of so much confusion I determined to investigate the subject more fully, believing that if God had a church it would not be split up into factions, and that if he taught one society to worship one way, and administer in one set of ordinances, he would not teach another principles which were diametrically opposed. Believing the word of God I had confidence in the declaration of James; If any man lack wisdom let him ask of God who giveth liberally and upbraideth not and it shall be given him," I retired to a secret place in a grove and began to call upon the Lord, while fervently engaged in supplication my mind was taken away from the objects with which I was surrounded, and I was enwrapped in a heavenly vision and saw two glorious personages who exactly resembled each other in features, and likeness, surrounded with a brilliant light which eclipsed the sun at noon-day. They told me that all religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines, and that none of them was acknowledged of God as his church and kingdom. And I was expressly commanded to "go not after them" at the same time receiving a promise that the fulness of the gospel should at some future time be made known to me.²²

Letter: Joseph Smith to I. Daniel Rupp (JSR43)

I. Daniel Rupp was compiling a book on the various religious denominations of the United States from the perspective of their members. For this collection, Rupp requested from Joseph Smith Jr. writing on Mormonism. Rupp's books, *He Pasa Ekkleis: An Original History of the Religious Denominations at Present Existing in the United States*, was published in 1844 containing this account written by Smith in July 1843. "Smith responded by sending a statement that varied only slightly from the historical sketch he had previously given John Wentworth, appending additional information about himself and Nauvoo"²³.²⁴

²¹ Vogel, 169.

²² Vogel, 169-170, underlining added for emphasis.

²³ Nauvoo is a city that was founded by Smith in Illinois. Mormon settlers arrived as early as 1838 and the city was granted corporate status by the state in 1840.

²⁴ Vogel, 183.

When about fourteen years of age I began to reflect upon the importance of being prepared for a future state, and upon inquiring the plan of salvation I found that there was a great clash in religious sentiment; if I went to one society they referred to one place, and another to another; each one pointing to his own particular creed as the “summum bonum” of perfection. Considering that all could not be right, and that God could not be the author of so much confusion I determined to investigate the subject more fully, believing that if God had a church it would not be split up into factions, and that if he taught one society to worship one way, and administer in one set of ordinances, he would not teach another principles which were diametrically opposed. Believing the word of God I had confidence in the declaration of James, “if any man lack wisdom let him ask of God, who giveth liberally and upbraideth not, and it shall be given him.”

I retired to a secret place in a grove and began to call upon the Lord. While fervently engaged in supplication my mind was taken away from the objects with which I was surrounded, and I was enrapt in a heavenly vision, and saw two glorious personages who exactly resembled each other in features and likeness, surrounded with a brilliant light which eclipsed the sun at noonday. They told me that all religious denominations were believing in incorrect doctrines, and that none of them was acknowledged of God as his church and kingdom. And I was expressly commanded to “go not after them” at the same time receiving a promise that the fulness of the gospel should at some future time be made known to me.²⁵

Joseph Smith Interview With David White (DNW43)

One August 29, 1843, the senior editor of the *Pittsburgh Weekly Gazette*, David Nye White, interviewed Joseph Smith Jr. at his home in Nauvoo, Illinois. It was subsequently published in the September 15 issue of the *Gazette*.

The Lord does reveal himself to me. I know it. He revealed himself first to me when I was about fourteen years old, a mere boy. I will tell you about it. There was a reformation among the different religious denominations in the neighborhood where I lived, and I became serious, and was desirous to know what church to join. While thinking of this matter, I opened the Testament promiscuously on these words, in James, ‘Ask of the Lord who giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not.’ I just determined I’d ask him. I immediately went out into the woods where my father had a clearing, and went to the stump where I had stuck my axe when I had quite work, and I kneeled down, and prayed, saying, ‘O Lord, what Church shall I join?’ Directly I saw a light and then a glorious personage in the light, and then another personage, and the first personage said to the second, “Behold my beloved Son, hear him.” I then, addressed this second person, saying, “O Lord, what Church shall I join.” He replied, “don’t join any of them, they are all corrupt.” The vision then vanished, and when I came to myself, I was sprawling on my back; and it was some time before my strength returned.²⁶

²⁵ Vogel, 184, underlining added for emphasis.

²⁶ Vogel, 181-182, underlining added for emphasis.

Alexander Neibaur Journal Entry May 24, 1844 (ANJ44)

On this date Alexander Neibaur visited Joseph Smith Jr. at his home in Nauvoo, Illinois and heard Smith give this account of the First Vision. It is assumed that the journal entry recounting this happening was written later the same day. Neibaur became a Mormon in 1837 and taught Smith Hebrew and German.

Brother Joseph tolt us the first call he had a Revival Meeting his Mother & Brother & Sister got Religion, he wanted to get Religion too wanted to feel & ~~sho~~ shout like the Rest but could feel nothing, opened his Bible f the first Passage that struck him was if any man lack Wisdom let him as of God who giveth to all men liberality & upbraidat not went into the Wood to pray kneelt himself down his tongue was closet cleavet to his roof—could utter not a word, felt easier after awhile—saw a fire towards heaven came near & nearer saw a personage in the fire light complexion blue eyes a piece of white cloth drawn over his shoulders his right arm bear after a while a person came to the side of the first Mr Smith then asked must I join the Methodist Church—No—they are not my People, st they have gone astray there is none that doeth good no not one, but this is my Beloved son harken ye him, the fire drew nigher Rested upon the tree enveloped him comforted Indeavoured to arise but felt uncomen feeble—got into the house told the Methodist priest, said this was not a age for God to Reveal himself in Vision Revelation has ceased with the New Testament...²⁷

Letter: John Taylor to Editor June 25, 1850 (JTL50)

John Taylor was baptized as a Mormon in 1836, was ordained an apostle in 1838, was incarcerated in Carthage when Joseph Smith Jr. was murdered (Taylor was himself wounded), traveled west with Brigham Young in 1847, and became the third President of the Church in 1880 after Young's death. Those credentials alone rank him among the most important early Mormons. In 1850 Taylor arrived in France for missionary service. Within a week of his arrival he wrote a letter to the editor of the *Interprete Angais et Français*. "While obviously drawing from Smith's 1842 letter to John Wentworth, and possibly Smith's History published in the *Times and Seasons*

²⁷ Vogel, 189-190, underlining added for emphasis.

about the same time, Taylor nevertheless claims Smith as his source of information and includes statements not contained in any previous source.”²⁸

Previous to this an holy angel appeared unto a young man about fifteen years of age, a farmer’s son, name Joseph Smith, and communicated unto him many things pertaining to the situation of the religious world, the necessity of a correct church organization, and unfolded many events that should transpire in the last days, as spoken of by the Prophets.

As near as possible I will give the words as he related them to me. He said that “in the neighbourhood in which he resided there was a religious revival, (a thing very common in that country) in which several different denominations we united; that many professed to be converted; among the number, two or three of his father’s family. When the revival was over, there was a contention as to which of these various societies the persons who were converted should belong. One of his father’s family joined one society, and another a different one. His mind was troubled, he saw the contention instead of peace, and division instead of union; and when he reflected upon the multidarious creed and professions there were in existence, he thought it impossible for all to be right, and if God taught one, He did not teach the others, “for God is not the author of confusion.” In reading the bible, he was remarkably struck with the passage in James, 1st chapter, 5th verse. “If any of you lack wisdom let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not, and it shall be given to him.” Believing in the word of God, he retired into a grove, and called upon the Lord to give him wisdom in relation to this matter. While he was thus engaged, he was surrounded by a brilliant light, and two glorious personages presented themselves before him, who exactly resembled each other in features, and who gave him information upon the subjects which had previously agitated his mind. He was given to understand that the churches were all of them in error in regard to many things; and he was commanded not to go after them; and he received a promise that the fulness of the gospel should at some future time be unfolded unto him: after which the vision withdrew, leaving his mind in a state of calmness and peace.”²⁹

Analysis by Elements

Six distinctive elements have been identified for analysis due to their differences or omissions throughout the various First Vision accounts: The date of the vision and age of Joseph Smith Jr., mention of revival(s), attack from dark powers, the appearance of personages, message of corrupt churches, and the central message of the vision. What follows is an analysis of the vision accounts by element. To see how the visions match up on a chart see Appendix A.

²⁸ Vogel, 191.

²⁹ Vogel, 192, underlining added for emphasis.

The Date of the Vision and Age of Joseph Smith Jr.

Of the eleven First Vision accounts available, only one of them gives a specific year of the vision, JSH39. Beyond the year of 1820, it also tells the season and time of day, Spring and in the morning. No other account mentions the season, however, JSW42 and JSR43 both say the sun was at noon. Here is the first case where Joseph Smith Jr. directly contradicts himself.

In regards to his age, nine of the accounts give us some information. Six of the accounts say Smith was 14 years old, two say 15, and one says 14 or 15. This problem could easily be resolved if it were just Pratt (OPA40) who said 14 or 15 and Taylor (JTL50) who said 15, since these are not directly from Smith. However, the very first claim of his age being 15 was by Smith himself in the earliest account available. Here too is a contradiction since the rest of Smith's accounts all say 14. Taking all of these into consideration, the vision would date sometime between December 23rd, 1819 and December 22nd, 1821.³⁰ The issue of whether or not there was a revival will also affect the dating of the vision.

Mention of Revival(s)

Only four accounts directly mention any sort of revival. The first is JSH39, which is the most important for Mormon believers since it is mostly of their received account. The others were White (DNW43), Neibaur (ANJ44), and Taylor (JTL50). Additionally, the letters of Smith in 1842 and 1843 may reference revivals. Each say, "I found that there was a great clash in religious sentiment." This could refer to a revival(s) or simply debate over doctrine.

³⁰ Smith's birth date was December 23rd, 1805.

The question of whether or not there was a revival at the time has been an issue of heated debate. Some scholars have argued that there were no revivals in the Palmyra area between 1818 and 1823. In response, some Mormons have pointed to possible revivals just outside of Palmyra in those years. This provides several questions to be answered: Were there any revivals within Smith's vicinity during that time that he would have been able to attend? What revivals impacted him? Is there any evidence that the revival(s) in question occurred at a different time?

Starting with the first mention of revival, in JSH39, presents a problem from outset. Smith said, "Some time in the second year after our removal to Manchester, there was in the place where we lived an unusual excitement on the subject of religion." The Smith family moved from Vermont to Palmyra, New York sometime around late 1816 or early 1817. From this point forward two versions of history have developed. Mormons believe that by the fall of 1817 the Smith's were able to make a down payment on a 100-acre farm in Farmington (which became Manchester in 1822). "During the winter of 1817-1818, they began construction on a log house, which was completed by the fall of 1818."³¹ If the Smith family moved to Farmington in 1818 then Smith's statement is consistent with his subsequent dating of 1820 for the vision in the same account.

The problem is there is strong evidence the Smith family still lived in Palmyra as late as 1821. Joseph Smith Sr.'s name appears on the road district tax list in Palmyra, New York from April 1817 to April 1820 as a resident on Main Street³². By June of 1820

³¹ Porter, Larry C. "Palmyra/Manchester, New York." *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*. Vol. 3 Ed. Daniel H. Ludlow.. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992. 4 vols. See also Enders, Donald L. "A Snug Log House," *Ensign*, August 1985, 14. as well as Backman, Milton, *Joseph Smith's First Vision*. Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1980. 40-41.

³² Palmyra Highway Tax Record, Palmyra, New York, Copies of Old Village Records, 1793-1867, microfilm #812869, LDS Family History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah. As cited by H. Michael Marquardt and Wesley P.

the family had moved to a cabin fifty-eight feet north of the line between Palmyra and Farmington³³. A survey used their cabin as a point of reference, “Minutes of the survey of a public Highway beginning on the south line... in the town of Palmyra three rods fourteen links southeast of Joseph Smith’s dwelling house.”³⁴ A newspaper printer also confirmed the Smith’s residence near the line.³⁵

Due to the financial difficulties of the Smith family, they could not just go out and purchase land. As was the case with most farmers, they purchased their land in installments over three years. The Smith could not have even put a down payment on the land until 1820. “The land was owned by the heirs of Nicholas Evertson...who died in 1807. In June 1820 the executor’s of Evertson’s estate conveyed to Dr. Casper W. Eddy... the power of estate to sell Evertson’s property holdings.”³⁶ Eddy subsequently transferred power of attorney to land agent Zachariah Seymour on July 14, 1820. Therefore the Smith’s could not have contracted for the land in Farmington before July 1820. It appears that the Smith’s contracted for the land shortly after Seymour received his power of attorney. This is confirmed by Farmington’s tax records.³⁷ Records show that Seymour died July 2nd, 1822³⁸, which would be shortly before the Smith’s third (and last) payment was due. This corresponds with Lucy Mack Smith’s (Joseph Smith Jr.’s mother) comments about the payments. “In the spring after we moved onto the farm we commenced making Mapel sugar of which we averaged ~~each season~~ 1000 lbs per year.

Walters, *Inventing Mormonism*. Salt Lake City, Utah: Smith Research Associates, 1998. 3, 10n5.

³³ See Appendix B for a map of the Smith’s residences, page 30.

³⁴ “Palmyra Town Book” (Old Town Record [1793-1870]), 221. As cited by Marquardt and Walters, 4, 10n9.

³⁵ “He recalled that he first saw the Smith family in the winter of 1819-20 living ‘in a rude log house, with but a small spot underbrushed around it,’ near the town line.” Marquardt and Walters, 4, 10n10.

³⁶ Vogel, 277n75.

³⁷ Farmington, New York, Assessment Roll, 7 July, 1821, 25, 32, Ontario County Records Center and Archives, Canandaigua, New York. As cited by Marquardt and Walters, 6, 12n16.

³⁸ *Ontario Repository*, July 16 1822. As cited by Marquardt Walters, 12n18, and Vogel, 285.

we then began to make preparations for build a house as the Land Agent of whom we purchased our farm was dead and we could not make the last payment.”³⁹ Seymour died in July 1822, meaning the Smith’s contracted for the land in the second half of 1820. Following, “in the spring after we moved on the farm,” Lucy Mack Smith goes on to tell about the events of 1823⁴⁰. This would place the move took place sometime in 1822.

Joseph Smith Jr. recorded that Lucy Smith⁴¹ was born on July 18, 1821 in Palmyra, New York.⁴² The Smith’s move to Farmington must have occurred after this birth. As of April 1822 Joseph Smith Sr. and the eldest Smith son, Alvin, were still on the Palmyra road tax list⁴³. Smith’s earlier statement in JSH39, “In about four years after my father’s arrival at Palmyra, he moved with his family into Manchester in the same County of Ontario.”⁴⁴ If the Smiths arrived in Palmyra in 1817, this would put the move to Manchester in 1821, or “about “ as late at 1822, but certainly not as early as 1818. The most reasonable explanation for all of this evidence is that the Smith family moved to Manchester in 1822. This means that either the 1820 date for the vision given by Joseph Smith Jr. was wrong or the location of Manchester he gave was wrong.

Since the “sacred grove” where the vision is said to have taken place is closer to the Manchester property, it is more likely that the date of 1820 is wrong. If the vision occurred in the Spring, and occurred “Some time in the second year after our removal to Manchester,” then the date of the First Vision would either be Spring of 1823 or Spring

³⁹ Vogel, 284-285.

⁴⁰ What is know called the “second vision” of her son Joseph where the angel Moroni told him about the plates of the Book of Mormon. Other important events followed including the death of her oldest son, Alvin, and the completion of their house (not log cabin) on their Manchester property.

⁴¹ Smith’s youngest sibling.

⁴² From “Smith Family Genealogy, 1843” in Vogel, 577.

⁴³ Marquardt and Walters, 7.

⁴⁴ Verse 3 in the received Pearl of Great Price version.

of 1824. But Smith also said, “there was in the place where we lived an unusual excitement on the subject of religion.” Is there evidence of revivals in the area before or around the Spring of 1823?

Three main denominations were present at the time of the Smith’s residence in New York, the Baptists, Presbyterian, and Methodists. For each denomination, the records we have show some minor gains or losses around 1820, while all of them show dramatic increases in 1823-1825⁴⁵. These increases in members reflect revivals several years after a supposed 1820 vision that was a response to Smith’s prayers in light the revivals.

The revivals of New York during this time are very well documented. There were so many, in fact, that the region became known as the “Burned-Over District” because the flames of revival occurred so frequently. It is precisely because these revivals are so well documented, however, that we know there were none in the vicinity of Palmyra or Farmington from 1819-1821. In the winter of 1816-1817 there was a revival that affected the Presbyterian church of Palmyra and it “received coverage in at least a dozen periodicals. The 1824-25 revival likewise received enthusiastic write-ups in an equal number of publications. But there is total silence in these same periodicals about any revival in Palmyra between 1819 and 1821.”⁴⁶

LDS scholars have not been silent on this issue. “Joseph Smith never claimed that the religious excitement was confined to 1820. 1820 was the year given for Joseph's initial vision, but the religious excitement which had influenced him clearly

⁴⁵ Marquardt and Walters, 17-18. The Presbyterian records are of particular interest. Joseph Smith Jr. said four members of his family joined this denomination. “The presbytery reported to synod only fourteen additions to the Western Presbyterian Church of Palmyra for the period between February 1820 and March 1821. If four Smiths joined that year, that left only ten others to join all year.”

⁴⁶ Marquardt and Walters, 19.

occurred before that time. Joseph described this religious excitement as occurring "some time in the second year after our removal to Manchester" (Joseph Smith-History 1:5), in other words, sometime between 1819 and 1820. The Smiths moved to Manchester in 1818. Walters's work is largely irrelevant in light of the works of more responsible historians... Milton Backman has demonstrated that in the summer of 1819, Methodists held a significant conference in Vienna just a few miles from Joseph's home. The meeting was attended by more than a hundred ministers of the Methodist faith... Backman also provided evidence of substantial increases in church membership among Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist congregations in the regions surrounding Palmyra and Manchester."⁴⁷

There are a number of problems with Roper's comments. For one, he makes an ad hominem attack against Wesley Walters by calling his work "irrelevant in light of the works of more responsible historians." The only historian Roper goes to is Milton Backman. Next, Roper asserts that the Smiths moved to Manchester in 1818. This is the same mistake that Backman makes, "After living in Palmyra village for about two years, the family moved in 1818 to a heavily wooded region known as 'the North Woods'."⁴⁸ In fact, this is precisely what Roper cites as evidence of the Smiths moving in 1818. However, Backman offered no argument for this claim and completely ignored the tax records of both Farmington and Palmyra, the biography of Lucy Mack Smith, the genealogy recording the birth of Lucy Smith in Palmyra in 1821, and the very words of Joseph Smith Jr. claiming they moved to Manchester four years after arriving in

⁴⁷ Roper, Matthew. "Review of *The Truth about Mormonism: A Former Adherent Analyzes the LDS Faith* by Weldon Langfield." *FARMS* 4:1 (1992): 78-92.

⁴⁸ Backman, 40.

Palmyra. If these are the makings of responsible history then irresponsible history should be a virtue.

Roper offers a revival in the summer of 1819 near Joseph Smith Jr. as one that could have possibly influenced Smith. Backman refers to a conference that began in July of that year⁴⁹. “The historic gatherings which led to a great revival and created such an impression on the town of Phelps began in July, 1819, when the Methodists of the Genesee Conference held their annual meetings in Phelps village, which was then called Vienna... In addition to the special services which were held in connection with this conference, camp meetings were conducted following the deliberations; and during the ensuing twelve months (from the summer of 1819 to the summer of 1820) a ‘flaming spiritual advance’ occurred in that region... It was common for those ministers to preach and participate in camp meetings while they were traveling to and from their annual conferences. It is not unreasonable, therefore, to assume that Joseph Smith might have attended meetings convoked by ministers of this conference held immediately before, during or shortly after the deliberations which took place in Phelps.”⁵⁰

The problem here is that no camp meetings are recorded in the minutes of the Vienna conference of 1819, as they are recorded in the conference of 1824. If there were such camp meetings that Backman describes, there would be some mention in the minutes, or even some reference in a local newspaper. However, even he does not offer any evidence that these took place. The “flaming spiritual advance” that Backman speaks of does not refer to the same time period. He cites M.P. Blakeslee for this in his “Notes for a History of Methodism in Phelps.” Blakeslee is actually speaking of a camp

⁴⁹ For a map of the region that shows Phelps (Vienna) in relation to Palmyra see Appendix C, page 32.

⁵⁰ Backman, 81-82.

meeting that took place in 1820, not 1819, and the preachers he speaks of are recorded as serving from July 20, 1820 to July 1821⁵¹. Blakeslee's comments refer to a period after which Joseph Smith Jr. claimed to have had his vision (Spring of 1820) and well after any revivals that would have sparked his questioning of religion.

It appears that there is a lack of sufficient historical evidence at this time to establish any revivals in the Smith family's vicinity around 1820. However, as some have pointed out, we need not be so strict as to limit the influence of revival activity to 1819-20. "There were revivals in Palmyra during 1816-1817 (as well as later in 1824-25). The 1816-17 activity could have been part of the religious excitement that impressed Joseph. In fact, his 1832 account says that his religious searching started "at about the age of twelve years." He turned 12 on Dec. 23, 1817, a year in which a large revival occurred in his town of Palmyra."⁵² Although there is little to no evidence of any significant religious activity in the region just prior to the received date of the First Vision, it seems entirely plausible that earlier revivals had some impact on Joseph Smith Jr., particularly since his earliest account recalls back to 1817.

There is greater evidence, however, that the revivals Smith actually referred to were later in the 1820s. He said, "My father's family was<ere> proselyted to the Presbyterian faith and four of them joined that Church, Namely, My Mother Lucy; My Brothers Hyrum, Samuel Harrison, and my Sister Sophronia."⁵³ Lucy Mack Smith specifically refers to a Presbyterian preacher, Deacon Jessup, shortly after Alvin's death in 1823. William Smith, one of Joseph's brothers, also mentions members of their family joining the

⁵¹ Marquardt and Walters, 30. The preachers he refers to are Loring Grant and John Baggerly. In fact, Marquardt and Walters show that membership in Phelps declined by 19 from July 1819 to July 1821 (page 31).

⁵² Lindsay, Jeff. "Question About Joseph Smith's First Vision Accounts." LDS FAQ 11 Sept. 2004. <http://www.jefflindsay.com/LDSFAQ/FQ_first_vision.shtml>.

⁵³ Neibaur also records Smith's mother, brother, and sister joining in his journal entry (ANJ44).

Presbyterian Church. “In 1822 and 1823, the people in our neighborhood were very much stirred up with regard to religious matters... The consequence was that my mother, my brothers Hyrum and Samuel, older than I, joined the Presbyterian Church.”⁵⁴

The evidence from Joseph Smith Jr.’s own words is that the revival mention is the one of 1823, not 1816-17. This provides more evidence for the Spring of 1824 date of the First Vision.

Attack from Dark Power(s)

Of the eleven First Vision accounts, six have no mention of Smith being attacked or tempted by someone or something. Of the other five that do mention something along these lines, three claim that Smith’s tongue was held so that he could not speak. What is most interesting is that two accounts seem to exclude the possibility of any attack happening. Appleby recorded (WIA39) that “while praying a glorious light encircled him, his mind immediately wrapt in a Heavenly Vision.” David White also noted from his interview that Smith said, “Directly I saw a light and then a glorious personage in the light” after praying. These represent contradictions in how the First Vision was understood among early Mormon believers. However, there is nothing in Smith’s own comments that exclude the possibility of being attacked. Though he omitted the dark powers in three of his five accounts, this cannot be shown as a contradiction or significant inconsistency.

The Appearance of Personages

Ten of the eleven accounts explicitly state that Joseph Smith Jr. saw two personages. The only one that breaks this almost consistent pattern is Smith’s earliest

⁵⁴ Smith, William. *William Smith on Mormonism*. Lamoni, IA: Herald Steam Book and Job Office, 1883. 6-7. In an interview he stated that “About the year 1823, there was a revival of religion in that region, and Joseph was one of several hopeful converts.” As cited by Marquardt and Walters, 19.

account, JSH32. Smith here claims to have seen “the Lord” but makes no mention of anyone else. Some LDS scholars have tried to write this off as a mere insignificant omission, but it is difficult to come up with any reasonable explanation for why Smith would omit seeing God the Father in this account but explicitly claim to later on. Seeing God the Father is not the same as seeing angels.

There appears to be some confusion over what Smith actually saw. Only three of the accounts are specific in offering them as God the Father and Jesus Christ, JSH39, DNW43, and JTL50. On the other hand, Appleby recorded (WIA39) that “they declared themselves to be angels.” “Not until the 1870s-80s (half a century after Smith’s death) did LDS leaders begin to consistently preach that Smith had seen Jesus and God the Father. Even then, confusion reigned among Mormons, with various church officials contradicting themselves and each other over what happened to Smith in the sacred grove. Mormon leader Orson Pratt, for instance, during a public lecture about Smith’s vision (c. 1837/39) said that the two personages “declared themselves to be angels.”⁵⁵ It is at least clear that there was no common understanding about what Joseph saw amongst early believers. The earliest mention of both God the Father and Jesus Christ known to exist is the 1839 account, 19 years after Smith claimed to have seen this. While this confusion and delay casts some doubt on the occurrence, it does not disprove it.

Message of Corrupt Churches

Nine of the eleven accounts tell us that Joseph Smith Jr. could not make up his mind about which church to join and eight of those record that Smith was told not to join

⁵⁵ Abanes, Richard. *One Nation Under Gods: A History of the Mormon Church*. New York, NY: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2003.16-17.

any of them. Once again, it is the earliest version, JSH32, that makes the difference. Smith said that “by Searching the Scriptures I found that ~~man~~ <mankind> did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatised from the true and liveing faith and there was no society or denomination that built upon the Gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament.” Smith had already made up his mind about the denominations before the vision. The account by Orson Hyde, OHR41, reflects this understanding, though he still includes the message by the personages to not join any church. The 1835 account does state that Smith was undecided, but does not include a message that he was not to join. On this matter, much like a politician, Smith took every position possible: he knew the churches were corrupt and he didn’t know, he was told not to join any and he wasn’t told, and every combination between them.

The Central Message

The most common message of the vision accounts is that the churches were (are) corrupt; nine accounts record this. Next is the message that the fullness of the gospel is coming and will be revealed to Smith, which is stated in six accounts. The other message, that Smith’s sins were forgiven, occurred only in four of the accounts. The interesting thing about these messages is the order they appear in. The first five accounts contain the message of Smith’s sins being forgiven while the first three make no mention of the fullness of the gospel being restored. While the omission of the differing messages is not a contradiction, they present a pattern that cannot go without notice.

Conclusions

From a logical standpoint several contradictions have been noted between the words of Joseph Smith Jr. regarding the First Vision: when and how he found out that all churches were corrupt, the time of day the vision occurred, and his age when the vision occurred. Historically, the data⁵⁶ indicates a Spring 1824 vision, which goes against just about every account. At the very best, the First Vision could not have occurred in the various ways that Smith and others have claimed. However, it seems more likely that the vision did not even occur at all.

The First Vision story is missing from most early Mormon documents. In a letter to her brother, Solomon Mack Jr., Lucy Mack Smith describes the Book of Mormon and Joseph came upon it. “Joseph after repenting of his sins humbling himself before God was visited by an holy Angel...”⁵⁷ Joseph Smith Jr. failed to mention it in an interview with Peter Bauder in October of 1830, though he tells the story of the Second Vision.⁵⁸ Early accounts from Nancy Towle (October 1831), Joseph C. Kingsburg (February 29, 1832), and Lydia Knight (October 1833) contain no mention of it.⁵⁹ The original 1845 manuscript of Lucy Mack Smith’s biography made no mention of the First Vision, though it was copied from the *Times and Seasons* publication when edited in 1853.⁶⁰

A number of elements, like the differences in the 1832 account and the replacement of the message of forgiveness of sins with the coming of the fullness of the gospel show a story that evolved over time rather than a story about a vision told from different perspectives. Many are left to what Richard Abanes concluded: “For decades most Mormons seemed rather confused about the First Vision. They often blended it

⁵⁶ Specifically- the date of the Smith family move to Manchester and the description of revivals in 1824.

⁵⁷ Vogel, 216.

⁵⁸ Vogel, 17.

⁵⁹ Vogel, 204-205.

⁶⁰ Vogel, 287-289.

with today's *official* version of yet another sacred encounter—Smith's 1823 vision of an unidentified angel, later to be named Moroni, This angelic visit was probably the *real* first vision, since for many years it was the *only* vision about which Smith, his family, or his followers ever spoke."⁶¹ This means that if any sort of "first vision" at some point in history, it was what is now referred to as the Second Vision.

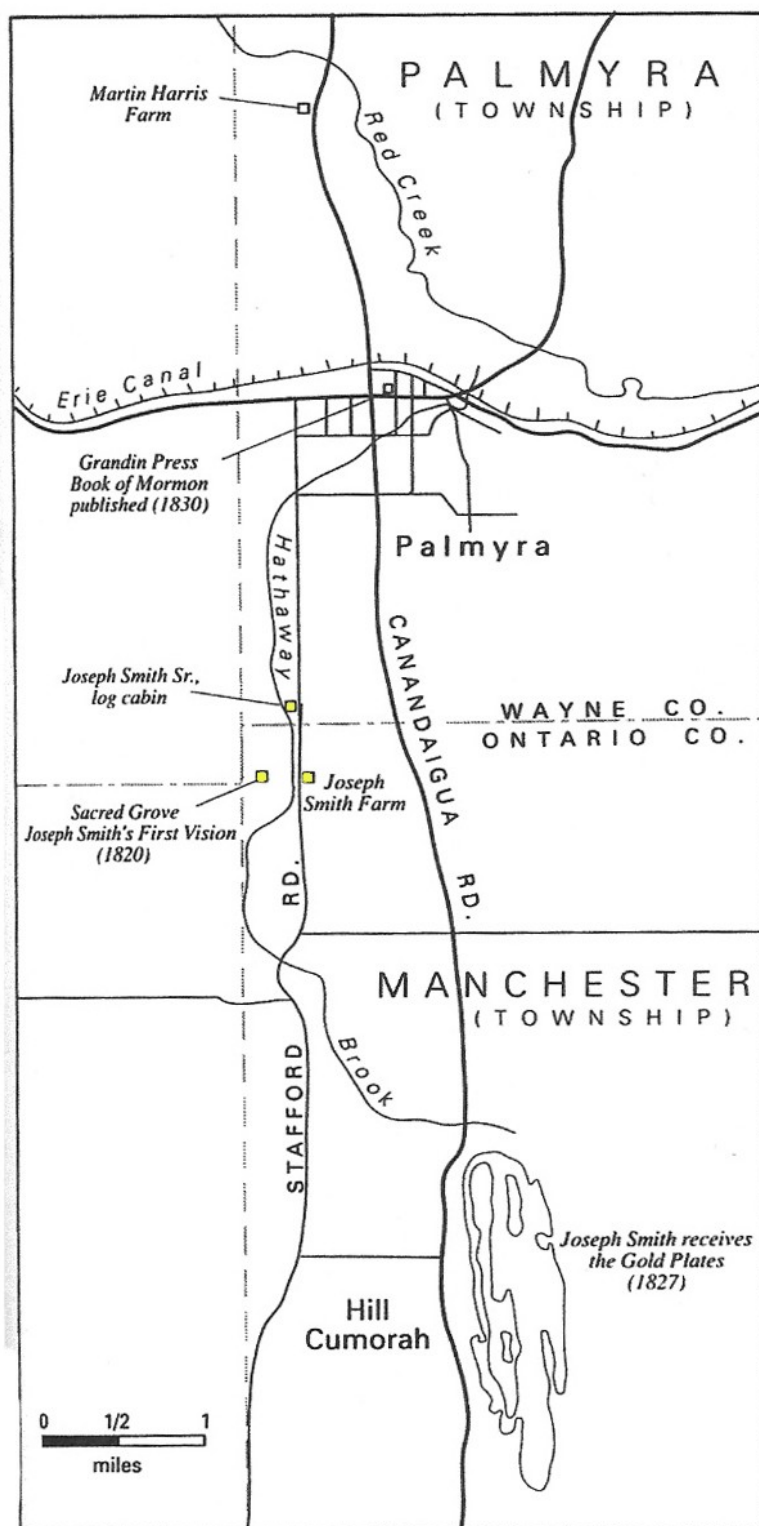
Appendix A

Vision Account	Smith's Age & Date of Vision	Mention of Revivals	Attack by Dark Powers	Personage(s)	Corrupt Churches?	Central Message
JSH32	15	No mention	No	1- Jesus	Already	Sins

⁶¹ Abanes, Richard. *Becoming Gods: A Closer Look at 21st Century Mormonism*. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2004. 31.

	(1820/21)		mention		decided	forgiven
JSD35	14 (1819/20)	No mention	Noise, couldn't speak	2- unknown	Undecided, not told	Sins forgiven
JSH39	14, Spring of 1820, morning	In whole district of region, 4 family members joined churches	Couldn't speak, near destruction	2- (God & Jesus)	Undecided, told not to join any	Don't join churches
WIA39	No mention	No mention	No- immediate light	2- angelic	Undecided, told not to join any	Sins forgiven, gospel
OPA40	14 or 15	No mention	Tempted	2- unknown	Undecided, told not to join any	Sins forgiven, gospel
OHR41	14 (1819/20)	No mention	Tried to cool passion- doubts	2- unknown	Already decided, told not to join any	Fullness of gospel to be restored
JSW42	14 (1819/20) Noonday	Great clash?	No mention	2- unknown	Undecided, told not to join any	Fullness of gospel to be restored
JSR43	14 (1819/20) Noonday	Great clash?	No mention	2- unknown	Undecided, told not to join any	Fullness of gospel to be restored
DNW43	14 (1819/20)	Reformation in neighborhood	No- directly saw light	2- (God & Jesus)	Undecided, told not to join any	Don't join churches
ANJ44	No mention	Yes- Mother, Brother & Sister	Couldn't speak	2- unknown	Undecided, told not to join any	Don't join churches
JTL50	15 (1820/21)	Revival in neighborhood	No mention	2- (God & Jesus)	Undecided, told not to join any	Fullness of gospel to be restored

Appendix B
(From *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 599.)

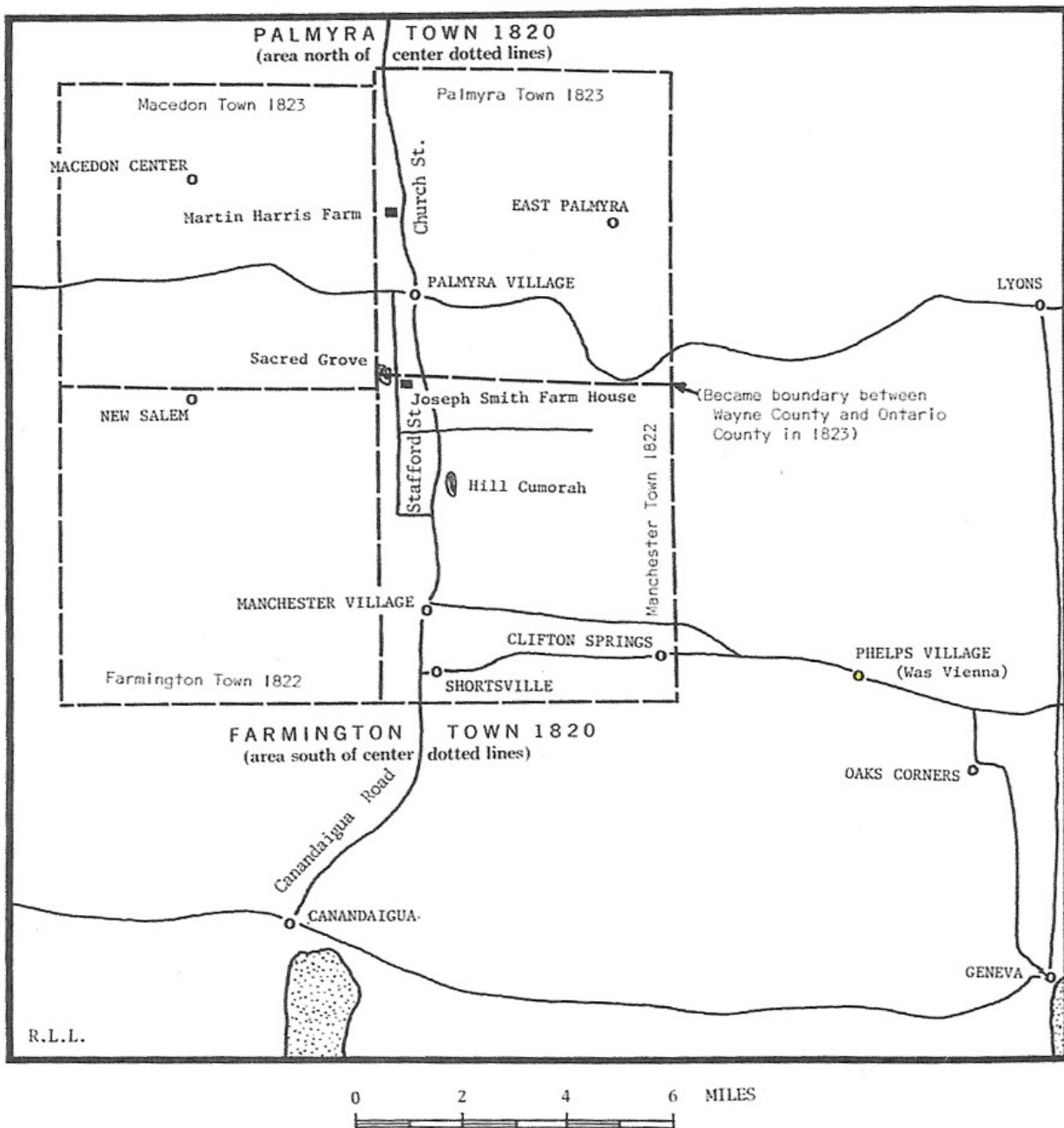


BYU Geography Department

Church history sites near Palmyra, N.Y., 1820–1831.

Appendix C

(From *Joseph Smith's First Vision*, 28.)



TOWNS AND VILLAGES LOCATED NEAR THE JOSEPH SMITH FARM

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